



The Amish and the Case for Humility Erik Wesner

A manifesto in humility.

It almost seems a contradiction in terms, but let's take a crack anyway.

The Old Order Amish are known for a lot of things. What do you think when you hear "Amish?" Beards, pies, *Rumspringa* maybe? I want to go a bit deeper in this manifesto.

When they're not around you or me, Amish speak a language called Pennsylvania German. *Demut* is their word for humility. And *Demut* isn't just for the Amish.

Why does humility matter?

It matters in business. It matters in life. It matters in our relationships.

"Celebrity" is a word you don't often see next to "humble." If you're gunning for stardom, there are only so many spots. Unless you're one of a select lucky few, you're bound to be disappointed, or worse. *Humility is healthier.*

A humble approach in a relationship helps one recognize the other person's inherent value and needs. *Humility fosters human understanding.*

If you're guided by humility in business, you are less likely to blow up the company by going too big, too quick. *Humility checks you when that demon in your brain says "more."* The one you know you should ignore.

And as some find out the hard way, humility can save a heck of a lot of pain.

The thing about humility is, if you don't choose it yourself, it's often chosen for you. Think Toyota, circa late-February 2010. Think Leon Lett, Super Bowl 27. Think Tiger, and countless others.

All ate platters of crow on national television. And a correction: rather than humility, they actually got its stark-raving ugly stepsister. The one you never want to meet, and especially not with two dozen cameras on you. *Humiliation*.

Root causes? No psychoanalysis here. But I'd be willing to bet: somewhere you'll find an arrogance. An arrogance that says: "I can get away with this." "There's no end in sight." "How could this go wrong?" Why? "Because *I'm* special."

Well, guess what? Everyone's special. That doesn't mean you get to rub it in everyone's face. It doesn't mean you get to do whatever you want. And it doesn't mean you'll get away with it.

Amish culture includes deference. Amish culture respects authority. Amish culture respects principles. The Amish are not perfect. They can be unhumble, and they screw up too. But Amish culture values humility—highly. It is in the way they speak, in the tone and the words they choose. It is in the way they dress (ankles only please). It's a core principle of the culture, and Amish society infuses it into its people. So, even when they mess up, they handle it with humility, and there are others around to remind them to do so.

We're not here to become Amish. But there's a lesson to learn from them. We can add a dose of *Demut* where it might be sorely needed—before we end up pulling a Tiger or a Toyota.

How can humility help? Let's talk about three things: your goals; your competitors and; leading the people on your team.

Goals

We're taught that ambition is a good thing. Figure out your BHAGs. Chart a plan for growth. Hit goals.

Agreed. Many Amish would too.

But on that ambition—a few questions. Are you being realistic? Is the goal always the most important thing? *Is it really?* And... what about collateral damage?

Humility checks you before you blow things up. Humility helps shape those goals. Amish companies max out at around 30 employees. There's a couple of reasons why.

One is that they prefer the closer human bonds fostered by the small-scale. Limited use of technology plays a part here too. But it's also because they know that bigness and power breed arrogance.

So Amish society says *slow down*. Some Amish can't *handle* slowing down. So they leave.

But the ones that do remain (and slow down) may find that they have time for other things—the reasons they're in business to begin with.

Slowing down and taking a more measured, humble, non-arrogant view of ambition may actually leave you stronger, may actually result in *less* pain—for you *and* others. Growing too big, too fast, can lead to disaster. We can tally up many recent examples.

We're not arguing against goals here, or even against size. We're arguing for taking a realistic look at the risk you bring—upon yourself and others on your team. Arrogance can push you to overlook those risks, or to simply ignore them when you should be saying “wait a minute.”

Slow down.

Humility, yin to arrogance's yang, does the reverse. It sees the human component. Its roots are the Latin "humus" and "humilis," meaning "earth" and "ground" respectively, and an adjective meaning "low." Humility brings you down to Earth.

Celebrities are lauded for being ambitious. In the realm of fame, overarching ambition—even without accomplishment—is a highly valued character trait. Ambition is necessary in any undertaking. But should it be a chief value?

Talk to a typical star-struck teen, and you'd think it is.

"She wants it *all*." One day, I'm gonna be *huge*."

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In the corporate world we find a similar orientation. Only the vocab differs:

"What drive!" "He's quite the go-getter, isn't he?"

While drive matters, "digestibility" and realism do too—whether we're talking work goals, business aims, or personal ambition. Not that 30 employees is humble and 40 is not. Not that farming is humble and making music is not. Not that x is and y necessarily isn't.

A big company can be a humble company. As some prove, stars can be modest people. And y may be more humble than x, depending on who's running the show.

But it takes swallowing a dose of *Demut*—repeatedly. And that takes being committed to humility, whether it’s in a mission statement or a life vision or guiding creed. One that isn’t just window dressing. It takes drilling it home again and again in the face of a celebrity culture that feeds you all the opposite signals.

That ain’t easy. But of course “ain’t easy” often means “worth doing.”

Everyone has ambition. Amish definitely do. But ambition ought to be weighed against the whole picture, taking realistic account of risks created—for yourself and others—when you invoke that ambition.

A humble mindset helps you do just that.

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Competition

Poor Leon Lett. His was the touchdown return that wasn't, short-circuited by a need to showboat—and one determined opponent.

Or if you're too young to recall Leon, think of any of his modern-era counterparts who antagonize unnecessarily, or who take competition too far, only to have things blow up in their faces. Think of the company head who unnecessarily puts others' jobs on the line in an attempt to make the quarterly numbers look a smidgen better, the latest trash-talking athlete, the guy teasing the bull in the YouTube video right before it breaks through the pen and gores him in the rear.

They all taunt fate, or egg on the other side. And then they get burned. Sometimes so bad it hurts to watch.

Why? What drives us to antagonize our enemies? It's as if a win isn't enough, as if something in us needs something more—and that by beating others down further, we can have it.

What drives it? Greed? Maliciousness? Self-esteem issues? No matter.

Respecting your antagonists—be it on a sports field or at the office or in the marketplace—grants a gift. A few gifts, actually.

Dignity is one. You avoid getting down in the mud.

It also grants you an opening—for cooperation.

Competitive victory is not stressed in Amish society. Children's softball is more about everybody getting a turn than getting a win. I knocked the volleyball around with some Amish teens recently. There was a bit of trash talk. But a lot more “good effort” and “shake it off” went

around on both sides of the net—and across it. Unlike in rat-race society, competition is not played up. Winning is not everything.

But to put one myth about the Amish to rest, this is nothing like a collective economy. Sure, there is a lot of lending-a-helping-hand and doing-unto-your-brother in Amish society. But in the market, Amish are thriving capitalists. Their 9,000 businesses compete with one another and with non-Amish contemporaries across the country.

But it's competition with an eye to harmony. Screwing your competitor over is not only bad form, it may come back to haunt you. And even if it doesn't, one thing is for sure—you've ruined any chance at a future productive relationship.

Slowing down and taking a more measured, humble, non-arrogant view of ambition may actually leave you stronger.

Mutual respect—stemming from an orientation that recognizes a) you and I are both human beings, and b) I'm up now, but may be down tomorrow—creates ways of thinking that foster opportunities for collaboration.

Knowledge shared from one to another helps a new business start, and the favor is repaid down the line. Small companies—competitors—team up to buy product in bulk. Etiquette prevents me undercutting your prices to snatch business away from you—and probably leaves me in a stronger position in the long run.

Taunting your opponent with your latest victory is not only bad form, it's short-sighted. Maybe it's because of their agrarian DNA, but Amish realize things are cyclical. Lean times follow good times—and vice versa. Finding an emotional spot in the happy medium is not only a lot healthier, it fosters a tranquil acceptance of your “foes.” And with over 90% of Amish businesses succeeding, they know that they'll be playing together in the same arena for a while.

The humble approach says: “I may have won this time. I might not the next either. You bet I'm going to try to, but I just might not. And I might find myself in your seat. So I recognize—you and I are both worthy. I respect you.”

Humility realizes that the Red Bull sugar thrill of taunting a competitor burns out quickly. And not only that, it can backfire, leaving you staggering with heart palpitations. Humility lacks the jolt, but turns out better for you in the long run.

Humble competition makes sense on multiple levels: It's healthier, you run less risk of losing face, and it opens up avenues for cooperation.

And who knows—it may even be better for the soul.

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Leadership

How does humility fit into leading others?

There's really only one lesson to cover in this section. And it's easy enough to remember.

I'd never ask you to do something I wouldn't be willing to do myself.

Follow that, and you won't go wrong. End of story.

Everyone has had the boss that made you take out the putrid dripping trash bags while he sat in the air-conditioned office and picked lint out from between his toenails—and then had the audacity to bark at you while you were slow getting back on the job because you had to wash the gunk off your hands. Or something along those lines.

Integrity burns up quick in that scenario. How long do you respect the guy? Not very.

Amish bosses jump in on dirty jobs. Amish bosses spend some time in their employees' shoes. Not every minute. But at least from time to time, they drop below their pay grade to haul out the gunky bags.

And guess what? Employees notice. Organization members notice. Teammates notice.

The action—this stepping into their shoes—is one that truly speaks louder than words. And you don't have to do it all the time. Even sometimes makes an impact.

When you want someone to follow, lead from the ground.

So maybe this humility stuff is beginning to sound not so bad about now. If this manifesto has done its job, that ought to be the case.

The thing about humility is, *it's hard*.

I know. I've lived in both worlds. So what do we do with this?

Obviously, it is a decision. You knew that already. We choose to act as we do. We choose arrogance over humility—but usually not consciously. The point is to leave this thought piece with a little voice in your head from now on that asks: “Is this the humble approach?” Or something along those lines.

That voice is annoying sometimes. You won't always want to listen to it. And it might even make you wish you'd never read this.

If anything, remember one thing. This bit is counterintuitive. But it's the lesson that's gone unspoken over the course of this manifesto.

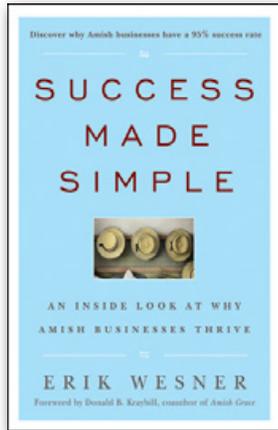
Humility is power.

How's that? Well, to revisit: Humility breeds productive relationships; A sounder sense of self; Healthier expectations.

It's a power that stems from self-control and self-assurance and the new opportunities that stem from all these things—from being comfortable in your own skin.

A humble approach can leave you in a stronger position in business. It can help create healthier relationships with others. And it can grant you a more realistic sense of what is possible.

All these things, ultimately, lead to contentment. And isn't that what it's all about? 📖



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erik Wesner is an independent expert on the Amish and their business practices, and author of *Success Made Simple: An Inside Look at Why Amish Businesses Thrive* (Jossey-Bass, 2010). Erik previously spent a decade as a sales manager and record-breaking salesperson at Nashville's Southwestern Company. He divides his time between Amish communities in America and Poland, the country of his roots. Read more on the [Amish](#) at Erik's blog *Amish America*, covering Amish business, culture, and other topics.

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BORN ON DATE

This document was created on November 3, 2010 and is based on the best information available at that time.

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